

# MORE THAN JUST GAMES

Mark Ideson, BSc'99, takes on the world in Pyeongchang Games

BY TODD DEVLIN, MA'09

When Canada's wheelchair curling team won Paralympic gold on home soil in 2010, Mark Ideson had never thrown a rock – let alone competed in the sport. Yet eight years later, the 41-year-old will skip that team into the 2018 Paralympic Games this March in Pyeongchang, South Korea. “We’d certainly like to win another gold medal,” said Ideson, BSc’99 (Environmental Science), who hopes to earn Canada an unprecedented fourth consecutive gold in the sport introduced in 2006. “I’m excited to lead this positive, fun group of talented players. I’ve been working very hard, both on and off the ice, to best prepare myself physically and mentally.”

For Ideson, the Games will serve as the culmination of a remarkable journey – from a helicopter crash, to taking up the sport at age 33, to leading his country on the world’s biggest sporting stage.

It’s been more than a decade now since Ideson crashed his helicopter into a farmer’s field during a maintenance flight just outside of Cambridge, Ont., on Feb. 2, 2007. He suffered 29 broken bones and was placed in an induced coma. The crash broke his neck in two places, and he was diagnosed with a spinal cord injury and quadriplegia.

He spent six weeks in hospital, and then five more months in rehabilitation at St. Joseph’s Health Care in London.

Eventually, he regained limited function of his arms and hands. Soon after, he sought ways to become active again.

Growing up in small town



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Ontario, Ideson played hockey. When he arrived at Western in the mid-1990s, looking for something to fill his competitive desires, he joined the cheer-leading team.

“I was drawn to the athleticism and the height at which the girls flew during a basket toss,” Ideson said. “I thought it might be a fun challenge to pursue. And luckily for me, I met my wife on that team and we’ve been married now for 14 years.”

Hockey and golf were his favourites. But post-accident, he looked to new sports. He tried wheelchair rugby, but soon realized he was “like a turtle amongst rabbits on the court.” When the Olympics came to Vancouver in 2010, his quest to find a new sport was fueled by new inspiration.

“I was sitting on the couch and a piece aired about Canadian gold medal-winning skeleton athlete Jon Montgomery,” Ideson recalled. “It said Jon had chosen a sport in his 20s – a sport where he could use his athletic abilities and maybe one day represent Canada at the Olympics. I thought, ‘Maybe I can find a sport and use my new abilities and maybe represent Canada someday, too.’”

The sport he found was wheelchair curling.

Training out of the Ilderton Curling Club, Ideson quickly improved his game, rising up the ranks at a rapid rate. In 2011, he skipped his team to a third-place finish at the Ontario Wheelchair Championships. When Team Canada conducted a coast-to-coast search for talent that year, he attended a camp in Grimsby, Ont., and was selected as one of 28 athletes to try out for the national team in Vancouver. He continued to make cut after cut, week after week, and finally earned a spot on the five-person mixed team.

Ideson’s first action on the world stage came in 2013, when he traveled to Sochi, Russia, for the World Championships.

“I felt extremely proud and honoured,” he said of the experience. “I’ll never forget throwing that first rock in an international competition.”

The team won gold and then returned to Sochi for the Paralympic Games in 2014 to win gold again – beating the host Russian team, 8-3, in the final.



Mark Ideson, BS'99, shows off his Gold Medal during the Celebration of Excellence visit to Rideau Hall, in June 2014 in Ottawa. (PHOTOS BY MATTHEW MURNAGHAN/CANADIAN PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE)

Since then, Ideson has continued to move up the ranks of Canada’s elite wheelchair curlers. And now, he will lead the team at the Gangneung Curling Centre at the 2018 Paralympic Games (March 8-18), calling the game and throwing the skip stones.

“It’s a new role for me, but I’ve been learning the sport’s strategy since I began playing and have been a student of the tactical game,” Ideson said. “The transition to skip has been a real team effort. I’ve gained experience and knowledge from past and present players, as well as the coaching staff, in preparing myself.”

He has been busy training – spending hours on the ice, in the gym, and studying film. And countless more hours fine-tuning his mental focus with mindfulness work. But every so often, Ideson reflects on just how far he’s come since his days – and weeks – in a hospital bed 11 years ago.

“I’ve met many amazing people I wouldn’t have met otherwise,” he says. “I’ve been fortunate to spend loads of quality time with my kids and my wife, and I’ve become part of an amazing national team where I will have the opportunity to compete on the world stage for a second time – with great friends of mine. Life is good.” **WAG**